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Does Diversity Matter? Police Violence, Minority Representation, and Urban Policing

In the United States, 1,134 people were killed by law enforcement in 2021, with 655 of those deaths belonging to racially marginalized groups, even though they make up a substantially smaller percentage of the population (Mapping Police Violence 2021). Police departments are also predominantly white, with roughly 67% of officer race being classified as Caucasian (Data USA 2019). With this, the question of whether there is a correlation between the racial diversity of police departments and their rates of violence against people of color arises. This paper argues that, while increasing officer diversity may prove beneficial to some urban departments, for the majority, increased diversity within law enforcement does not substantially decrease the amount of violence towards racial minorities due to police culture and institutional practices.

Specifically, I examine how structural policing methods target and excessively monitor Black and Hispanic communities, which leads to increased police encounters (Carbado 2016). Through police culture, these increased encounters then create further opportunities for acts of violence to be used against these minority communities. I begin by discussing several claims of increased officer diversity. I then discuss why these claims do not prove beneficial to decreasing violence against racial minorities through various aspects of police culture and policing methods.

Diversity reforms in law enforcement have been a common solution to address the disproportionate police killings of both Black and Hispanic individuals. These reforms are said to have several benefits in terms of both police and citizen perception. First, diversification of

police departments is thought to be a legitimizer of law enforcement among racial minorities (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson Crotty, and Fernandez 2017; Gaston, Teti, and Sanchez 2021; Smith 2003). Second, minority officers are said to have less violent tendencies when coming into contact with people of color (Ba et al. 2021; Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson Crotty, and Fernandez 2017). In other words, the more representation that minority communities see within law enforcement, the more trust there will be between both the department and communities of color. Specifically, Black and Hispanic individuals will not feel threatened when coming into contact with officers. On the other hand, compared to white officers, minority officers will not feel threatened when policing both Black and Hispanic communities because they too are part of a marginalized group. Both the perception of the police and minority communities are legitimized, which will then reduce the use of violence by law enforcement.

These claims of increased legitimacy through diversification of policing institutions do not decrease police violence towards racial minorities. This is due to institutional methods that disproportionately target Black and Hispanic communities. Broken windows policing and “mass criminalization” (Carbado 2016) are institutional practices that contribute to the excessive surveillance and use of violence against racially marginalized groups. Broken windows policing is the characterization and targeting of neighborhoods that are on the brink of disorder, which are commonly minority communities, where nonserious crimes are hyper fixated on (Carbado 2016, 1485-1487). These areas are overpoliced simply for the fact that they are communities of color, which leads to increased contact with law enforcement. With this increased contact, “mass criminalization” is performed (Carbado, 2016). “Mass criminalization” is “the criminalization of relatively nonserious behavior or activities” (Carbado 2016, 1487), which is performed by policing institutions towards racially marginalized communities. These nonserious crimes almost

always have probable cause because they are committed so frequently. In certain situations, such as traffic stops, “probable cause” is even lowered to “reasonable suspicion” (Murakawa, 2019), further increasing contact. Through institutional practices, even with increased diversity, minority communities are still disproportionately targeted. “Black and Hispanic citizens [even] believe that the police treat them unfairly” (Holmes, Painter, Smith 2019, 213) and we can see that this is true through both broken windows policing and "mass criminalization" (Carbado, 2016). These communities are still being targeted and criminalized for their everyday behaviors, no matter the race of the officer patrolling the area. Those who are policing, whether they are of a racial minority or not, are still contributing to the large scale criminalization of Black and Hispanic communities, which does not change the perception of the police. What this leads to is a fear of the police (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2019, 752) that evokes officers' use of violence.

Officer perception of racial minorities also does not change with increased diversity due to policing culture. Research has provided that some minority officers often react with the same or greater amount of violence as white officers when patrolling Black and Hispanic communities. This is “because of [an] increased pressure to adopt an organizational role that prescribes such behavior” (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson Crotty, and Fernandez 2017). Policing culture and institutional norms of departments are pushed onto those of all races. These norms often “encourage or promote masculinity” (Carbado 2016, 1514). Masculinity is that one needs to prove themselves to be taken seriously or respected as an officer. Leading to all officers feeling the need to exercise this power. Masculinity promotion within departments has then led racially marginalized community members to feel that officers of color “were tougher on them and felt freer to use force” (Fan 2015, 910). With this, officer violence towards racially marginalized groups stems from police culture and the encouragement of masculinity. Even with increased

diversity, institutional norms still create a space where violence is used against Black and Hispanic individuals.

Policing culture also creates stereotypes and profiling methods that influence officers. The “place hypothesis” (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2019) is the thought that “police patrolling in these disadvantaged places may see minority citizens as particularly threatening to their wellbeing, a perception that may trigger police killings” (2019, 753). Due to longstanding stereotypes of Black and Hispanic communities, created from both broken windows policing and “mass criminalization” (Carbado 2016), police culture has caused officers of all races to have preconceived notions of these communities. These notions then cause officers to act defensively, often with force, when coming into contact with these individuals. These stereotypes, and the promotion of masculinity, are exactly what lead Black and Hispanic individuals to have a higher chance of getting shot (Fan 2015) and increased overall use of violence against them.

These institutional practices and stereotypes are also deeply ingrained in law enforcement. Although “many law enforcement agencies do indeed prohibit racial profiling” there are many loopholes that still allow departments to racially profile against people of color (Murakawa 2019, 478). These practices are adopted by officers through both police culture and training. These officers then “interpret their practices through colorblind lenses” (Armenta 2017, 89). This colorblindness results in most officers not realizing what they are doing is wrong. They believe they are just following the policies of the institution. But this is by no means a justification of their use of violence, rather it is an explanation as to why diversification tactics do not decrease rates of violence. Those within law enforcement are so “influenced by organizational structure, policies, practices and culture” (Gaston, Teti, and Sanchez 2021, 669) that the faults are not realized.

These structural practices can be translated to urban departments around the country. Specifically, in the Chicago Police Department, as of 2016, roughly 20% of officers identified as Black and around 23% as Hispanic, and "even in this highly diverse department, Black and Hispanic civilians in Chicago are engaged by the police at rates disproportionate to their shares of the population" (Ba, et al. 2021, 2-6). This is due to broken window policing and "mass criminalization" (Carbado 2016) tactics performed by the department. Taking into account the over-policing of minority communities and the diversity of the CPD "police engage Black civilians in Chicago more often" (Ba et al. 2021, 4) than others. Being disproportionately policed, even with high percentages of officer diversity, still means there is "a higher risk of contact with the police because coercive crime-control strategies are disproportionately deployed in those areas" (Holmes, Painter, and Smith 2019, 758), which also leads to higher chances of violence due to minority perception. In fact, "by contrast, Black officer' violent crime enforcement is only slightly lower than white officers' (Ba et al. 2021, 5-6), meaning the diversity of the department does not play much of a role in decreasing violence against minorities. Additionally, "Hispanic officers display lower levels of enforcement activity than white overall" (Ba et al. 2021, 6). With the numbers for both racially marginalized groups only being slightly lower than those of white officers, we can see that violence towards minority groups even happens in highly diverse departments.

This paper argued that increased diversity within law enforcement does not substantially decrease the amount of violence towards racial minorities due to police culture and institutional practices. I examined Carbado's (2016) framework of "mass criminalization", as well the institutional practice of broken windows policing to show that minority communities have a higher risk of contact with law enforcement, which can lead to acts of violence. I then examined

Holmes, Painter, and Smith's (2019) "place hypothesis" to show that police culture influences officer perception of racial minorities as well as provided data from the Chicago Police Department. Saying increased diversity will solve the issue of police violence against marginalized minority communities is asking them "to feel like police officers are protectors rather than hunters" (Fan 2015, 911), when in fact they are not. Police violence against Black and Hispanic communities will not be solved through small diversity reforms because it is a structural issue that stems from institutional practices and police culture. There need to be more substantial measures taken, such as abolition approaches, to see decreased police violence. Increasing the number of both Black and Hispanic "officers is only a solution for the small handful of large departments around the country" (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson Crotty, and Fernandez 2017). Increasing officer representation will not address the larger issue; the issue needs to be addressed at its core.

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